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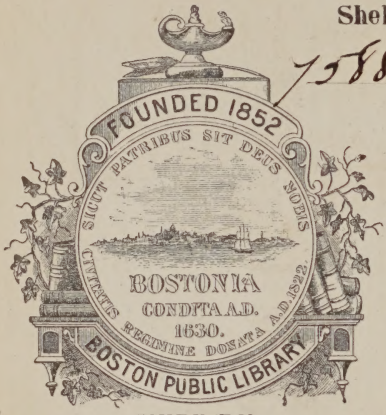


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June 6, 1895

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# A PLAIN QUESTION OF PERSONAL DUTY

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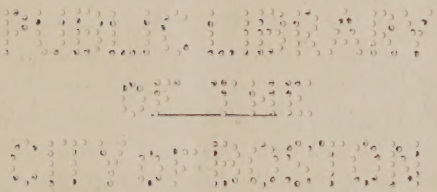
PREACHED IN THE FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH, PORTLAND, OREGON

BY

REV. EARL M. WILBUR



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Rev. A. E. Mullett,
June 6. 1895

# A PLAIN QUESTION OF PERSONAL DUTY.

"Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves."— ROM. xv. 1.

YOU will already have discovered, I presume, that I am about to speak on the subject of temperance,— an old subject, and somewhat threadbare; and yet, like the poor, it is "ever with us," ever pressing upon us in one or another of its various phases, and ever demanding of earnest people that they say something and do something with regard to it. With some it is an unpopular subject: on the one hand, because it demands more independent moral courage and self-denial in personal conduct than almost any other question that affects conduct deeply; and, on the other hand, because hardly any other cause has suffered so much at the hands of its friends or been advocated with so much of narrow intolerance and active fanaticism. And yet, even when one sees the temperance fanatic, one is reminded of what Phillips Brooks said: that, if ever a cause justified fanaticism, the temperance cause did; and that to him there was nothing more disgusting or more disheartening than the selfish, ease-loving, luxurious man indulging in dissipation and denouncing temperance fanaticism.

There is material in the subject for half a dozen sermons instead of one, without beginning to exhaust the theme and without once repeating one's self. We might very profitably spend an hour on the physiological aspect of the temperance question,— the effect which the continued use of alcoholic beverages, even in moderation, has upon the physical organism, the morbid conditions they induce, the passions

and cravings they excite,— a subject on which there is a vast amount of misunderstanding, and, I may almost say, superstition, even among the intelligent. We might consider the sociological aspect of the question,— the relation of intemperance to poverty and crime and insanity and divorce. The results of intemperance in England have been summed up to be nine-tenths of the pauperism, three-fourths of the crime, and one-third of the insanity. Or we might look at the economic aspect of the question, the stupendous amount of our annual national drink bill, footing up two years ago to nine hundred and fifty millions of dollars,— almost a billion! more than double the total expense of the national government, more than quadruple the sum of the revenues received from the tariff, more than five times the cost of all public and private schools in the country. This is the amount directly paid for drink, and no account is included of the indirect cost through crime and poverty and disease and insanity. It is a fundamental principle of political economy that men should spend money only for that which contributes to human welfare or produces more wealth. But what can be said of the economics of an enormous expenditure which does not supply human need, but creates it; which does not create wealth, but destroys both it and the capacity for producing it? We might speak, too, of the legal aspect of the question, of the different plans for controlling or restraining by law, not intemperance, but some of the causes of intemperance,— of high license, low license, local option, prohibition, the Gothenburg system, so much discussed among us of late. We might give most profitable attention to the political bearings of the question (for the liquor question already influenced politics long before the Prohibitionist party arose), its powerful lobby at Washington, and its representatives on most city governments, ever ready to oppose any policy which shall cause less liquor to be sold, and to promote any which shall advance the liquor interest.

I speak of these various sides of the temperance question in order to indicate that it is not a narrow question for narrow-

minded people, but one which touches personal and social and political life on almost every side. But I now leave these aspects of our subject, which are more or less theoretical and abstract, and would limit our thought for the present to that side of the question which concerns our own personal conduct, and may therefore be called the moral aspect of the temperance question. What principle are you and I to follow with regard to the use of alcoholic beverages? Though I have most deep and earnest convictions as to how this question should be answered, and would gladly persuade all men to them, yet I do not wish to seem narrow or intolerant on this subject; and I, therefore, desire to say at the outset that I freely admit the moral right of any to differ from my conclusions, so long as their moral convictions of duty persuade them otherwise.

And, in the first place, I shall not say that it is wrong, in the abstract, to drink alcoholic liquors, nor even to manufacture or sell them. There are those, as you know, who do think it wrong in itself; and who would not drink a drop of liquor, even as medicine, though their life hung upon it. But that is an extreme position. It is the results of the drinking upon one's self or upon others which, if anything, should make one refrain from the act. If the act of drinking could be isolated from all unfavorable circumstances, near or remote; if one could drink an occasional glass, as is no doubt sometimes the case, from which no evil resulted to any human being,— I cannot see that the act would be morally wrong. If men were all perfect, and if no harm came to individuals or to the community from the use of alcoholic beverages, then there would be no necessity for total abstinence. But men are not perfect, and are not likely to be so on this earth. And, under such conditions as actually exist, there seem to me to be considerations which make entire abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages the only principle which fully discharges our duties toward either ourselves or others.

For, in the first place, there is not perfect safety even in

the moderate and guarded use of even the lighter beverages. You may think there is. You may believe that you understand your own nature and tendencies so perfectly that there is not the slightest danger in your case, however it may be with others of less strong will and self-control. And yet it is curious to see that this is just what every one believes of himself; and, however strong your confidence may be, still it cannot be stronger than that of many others who have believed like you, and yet have fallen, and only when it was too late found out their fatal mistake. No man can tell, except by experiment, whether or not indulgence will lead to intemperance in his own case; but, if the experiment turns out unfavorably for him, he discovers it only when it is too late. Out of any given hundred men who choose not to make total abstinence their rule, a certain proportion will inevitably succumb to appetite; but no human sagacity can predict which they will be. The strongest, the brightest, the most noble, are, as all experience proves, liable to fall as well as the others. It might seem as if the ministerial profession were one whose surroundings all tended in the direction of helping one to withstand this vice, and that, if any class of men might indulge with safety, it would be they. And yet you would be surprised if I should give a list of eminent ministers who have been ruined through drink. You may say to yourself, "The chances of a fall are so very small, I am willing to accept them." And yet what moral right have you to take uncertain chances, the one issue of which will not only ruin yourself (it is your privilege, if you please, in one sense, though in a very narrow and selfish sense, to throw your own life away, if you choose to do so), but which will also bring disgrace and unhappiness on your family and friends, and add a burden and a corrupting example to the community?

But, even granting that you and I are safe, so far as we ourselves are concerned, if we practise occasional light drinking (although we have already seen that we have no warrant for making any such concession), what will be the

effect of our comparatively harmless practice upon others who come within the range of our influence, and are more or less determined in their conduct by our own? That is the question which we have most often and most seriously to consider. That is the consideration that comes closer to our personal conduct than any other connected with the whole temperance issue; and it is to that I wish to have you pay the most serious attention.

I do not raise the question as to whether one may indulge in occasional light drinking at home or among friends, and still be a thoroughly upright man. There can be but one answer to that question. We all know men who are intrinsically good, who indulge temperately, and apparently without moral harm to themselves. The real question is far deeper than that. The question that concerns us is, How will such indulgence, even though admitted to be innocent if properly guarded, affect the habits of others? There are probably some who would reply that how the habits of others may be affected is not a matter which need concern us, that we are not responsible for what others may do, and that each one must stand on his own feet. And yet, if an innocent habit of mine, from which I might have refrained, has the result of bringing about a habit in another which works his injury or ruin, how can I say that I am not at least indirectly responsible for the evil result? I myself am indirectly responsible for the harm done, though I did not intend it, and should not have desired it. We know full well that our conduct affects that of others profoundly, and we are morally bound to see to it that its results shall not be harmful if we can prevent it.

What I say is particularly true of the customs of social life. The drinking habit is pre-eminently a social habit. Drinking habits are formed by people's drinking together. And it is when persons are with one another on terms of fellowship that the influence of one's personal conduct is exerted either for good or for evil. Take a young man who who has hitherto abstained, and try to argue him into the

belief that moderate drinking amid good surroundings is commendable, and you will by no means be sure of persuading him. But place him in a company of refined people, his friends and acquaintances, for whom he has respect and in whom he has confidence, and, if they indulge, the chances are overwhelming that, unless his principles are remarkably strong, he will be carried off his feet, and follow the example of those about him rather than be unlike them. I have, to my grief, known of this being done again and again, and have seen young men, who had never before tasted liquor of any kind, form the beginning of drinking habits through the example of their very friends, who did not realize that they were the means of starting one out on a course of which the end was uncertain, and might, as in the case of so many others, be ruin. I have within the last two years observed young men who came from homes in which abstinence was the universal principle, who first tasted liquor among their best friends, at the dinner table, and in a refined way, who now will not stop with the first glass, and who will go complacently into saloons for their evening's pleasure. They are not intemperate, but they have crossed the line of perfect safety.

So long as one abides by the principle of entire abstinence on all occasions, in all places, in whatever company, I am positive that he will not become intemperate. When he has once crossed that line, no human wisdom can say where or when he will stop. And the personal influence which you and I exert is so much the more important, since it is so hard a thing to resist the custom of those about us, when they are our friends. Almost the hardest and most disagreeable thing I have to do is to abstain from a social and, as one might say, harmless glass, when I am surrounded by friends whom I respect and love, who partake of it. I should like to do as others do. I shrink from doing what may even remotely seem, at a time of social intercourse, like censure of the conduct of my friends or a reproof calculated to mar their pleasure. I do not at all wonder that so many break

over their principles of abstinence, and I blame those about them rather than themselves. Do you know how drunkards begin their course? Is it by going to the bar of some low saloon, and drinking a glass of whiskey or absinthe or pure alcohol? No: the first glass is, almost without exception, what would be called a harmless glass of something so light and pleasant as hardly to exhilarate, drunk at the table of a friend in the company of gentlemen and ladies, or among one's fellows to accompany a good story or a song. It is only after the first revulsion has been worn off by the pleasant surroundings of the habit that first the time and the place and the circumstances of the drinking, and afterward the nature of the beverage, change by insensible degrees, until an appetite has been created, one does not know when or how, but as strong as the grip of death.

There are a number of persons of your acquaintance to-day who, according to all ordinary rules of human probability, will, twenty years hence, be dishonored, despised, ruined body and soul, through strong drink,—perhaps even filling drunkards' graves. Of course you do not know which they are. But it may be your own father or brother or husband or son or neighbor or friend. It may be mine. It may be even yourself or myself. God knows, though he mercifully spares us the distressing knowledge. If you think this prophecy startling or rash, reflect that a similar one might have been made twenty years ago to almost any company of people in any church, and that the events of these past twenty years would have justified it completely. These unfortunates will almost all of them have taken their first step in intemperance, not through the persuasion, but through the social influence of their friends. Are you willing, even at your club or in your home, amid all the restraints that there surround you, to contribute, through the influence of your personal conduct, even an infinitely small fraction to such a result?

It is not merely the weak who will fall. I appeal to the experience of any of you who have had experience in the

world, when I say that it is not the weak alone who yield to temptation, not your vacillating, namby-pamby young man alone who falls into habits of intemperance. It is as often the man of strong will, who yields out of his strength, deliberately and fearlessly, because confident in it, but who in yielding gradually rivets upon his physical organism shackles which it will require the strongest will roused to its fullest powers to cast off. It is often said that any man can stop drinking if he will, which is doubtless true. But there is lurking in that statement the quiet assumption that his will is perfectly free. Yet I ask you to observe that intemperance is not a thing of the will alone. It speedily becomes a form of physical disease, which does not consult the will power any more than dyspepsia does, and which greatly weakens the foundations of the will's native freedom.

So far as regards our own personal duty, it makes little difference whether intemperance arises from moral or from physical weakness. So long as our conduct influences in any degree the conduct of those about us, we cannot escape responsibility for that influence and its results by saying that others must answer for themselves. Even if they do choose for themselves, if their choice is influenced (as it is) by our conduct, we, as well as they, shall be answerable for the results of their choice.

It would be very fine if those about us were all so strong that our example formed no temptation to them; but we have to take men as we find them, and many of them weak and easily yielding. I have, fortunately, a balance so steady that I could walk across a high trestle upon the outer guard-rail, and have no fear of dizziness. But you would think me heartless if I encouraged others to do it, who did not know whether they had a steady balance or not. And I should be considered guilty of almost criminal malice if I performed the feat with a troop of school-boys at my heels, who would be sure to imitate me. I have a perfect right to walk on the guard-rail, if I choose; and, if any one following me falls off and is killed, I may say, indeed, that he has his own reck-

lessness to thank. And yet few who wish their kind well would not rather walk on the ties in the middle of the track than lead any one else to take the slightest risk of falling.

It may be said that the danger to any one from such a use of the lighter beverages as that to which I refer is very slight. I believe that it is much less slight than many suppose; and yet, if it were so, it cannot be denied that the tendency of such use is a constant force, always pulling downward. No one contends that light drinking is more likely to result in temperance than is abstinence. The tendency is not often realized, to be sure. And yet it is sometimes carried out to all its horrible fulness. There is hardly a family, even in the better circles of society, even among the supporters and frequenters of churches, that is not blighted with it in some member or another.

I submit, then, that it is the privilege and duty of us who are strong, of us who feel sure that we shall never become the slaves of appetite, whatever others may do, to do all in our power to furnish a favorable and healthful environment to the weak; and, since we have no means of knowing who the weak are, for they may be in our own household or among our dearest friends, to abstain on all occasions from either offering or partaking of those beverages which are abused by any or which lead to any abuse, even though we feel that they would be quite innocent for ourselves.

To those who would be unwilling to give up a pleasant indulgence for the good of others, I can say nothing here that will be to any purpose; but to those who are willing to deny themselves, whether little or much, if so be, that others may be helped and kept from the temptations that might lead to their ruin, I would say, *Obsta principiis.* Take a stand against the beginnings, both in yourself and in others. I know of no course of action with regard to the temperance question that is certain to result in temperate lives except total abstinence. Other principles may so result, and they may not. It is always an uncertain problem. This principle is absolutely sure. Our chief danger is not from the low

saloons and the vicious classes. They but carry well on a work which has been well begun elsewhere. Our danger is from the lack of a noble purpose and a self-denying aim in those who have influence, who set the fashion, and whose customs carry weight.

I appeal to you, fathers and mothers, heads of families, whose customs have weight with your children and your guests; to you, teachers, who have so much to do with moulding the characters and fixing the principles of those under your charge. Let your influence be cast unequivocally in the right direction, so that no one shall mistake or be misled, but the weak be strengthened and the thoughtless rebuked. I appeal to you, young men and women, to help to raise the standard of conduct among your associates, and keep it high above possible criticism, and never weakly to acquiesce and follow the doubtful example of another. I appeal to you, of any age or condition, who receive the teaching of Jesus, and would make self-sacrifice for others' sake a principle of your lives, to you who love your fellow-men, and wish to help them, to give help by removing stumbling-blocks that might be cast in their path by your conduct.

I have a highly respected friend who has come to earnest convictions quite different from those which I have expressed here,—who believes that he can hinder intemperance in others most, not by abstaining, but by moderate and genteel drinking, and by showing when to stop. When he speaks of the total abstainer's conduct as more of a hindrance to temperance than his own, I think he must have in mind the temperance fanatic, who not only abstains, but takes every opportunity of calling attention to his abstinence, and of denouncing in bitter terms those who disagree with him. Such a person certainly injures his cause. But I cannot conceive how one who is politely firm, yet unobtrusive, about his principles can ever give offence, however strongly he may adhere to them.

This, then, is the reason why I follow total abstinence on all occasions, and why I commend it to others as the only

principle that can be followed by no evil results, because I know that among those about me (and I do not know which ones) there are some who are likely to become intemperate, and because I would do everything possible, so far as my own influence can go, to lead them away from drinking rather than toward even any most innocent form of it. For their sake I count it but a privilege to forego any small pleasure that I might gain from indulgence.

I cannot — least of all in the pulpit of a liberal church — lay down any rule of conduct, and demand that all shall adopt it. We differ from each other in our opinions according to our temperaments and education, and have a perfect right to honest differences. But I can lay down a safe principle, which will serve for universal application as fundamental both to Christianity and to sound morals. Whatever you do, first regard your influence on the welfare of others. My friend believes that he shall best promote that welfare by indulging moderately. I believe that I shall best promote it by abstaining altogether. Come to your own decision of the matter, find out the truth as best you can, be perfectly honest and earnest in your search for it, and then act on principle. Whether you indulge with my friend or abstain with me, do not do either the one or the other because it is what you see your fellows do or because your personal inclination moves you to it. Act from the principle of unselfishness, of willingness to help those weaker than yourself. Regard first and last and always the good of others whom your conduct may influence rather than the selfish preference of yourself. Then act as God gives you light, and duty will be well performed.

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